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ABSTRACT

In nongraded education, children of different ages and ability levels are taught together and make continuous progress rather than being promoted once per year. Research studies support nongraded primary education by indicating that young children vary in their rates of intellectual development and learn best through hands-on activities with concrete materials. In addition, participation in mixed-age groups has social and cognitive benefits. Teaching multi-age classes requires more teacher preparation time and knowledge about child development, integrated curriculum, and instructional strategies. The implementation of nongraded education is facilitated by the following: (1) understanding and support by teachers and parents; (2) practical training for teachers; and (3) support by both administrators and school boards. (MLF)

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Nongraded Primary Education

by Joan Gaustad

In the mid-1800s, the revolutionary idea of mass public education created the need for an efficient, economical system capable of handling large numbers of students. Graded education—the practice of classifying and dividing students by age—spread rapidly throughout the United States and has remained the standard until the present (Goodlad and Anderson 1987).

In the 1990s, educators and citizens are reevaluating their schools and proposing reforms to meet the needs of diverse social and economic groups. Nongraded primary education is a key component of many reform proposals, including the Kentucky Educational Reform Act and the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century.

Many experimental nongraded programs tried in the sixties and early seventies failed due to inadequate understanding, lack of administrative and community support, and poorly planned implementation. Today's nongraded model is supported by additional decades of research and refined by the study of successful programs.

What Is Nongraded Education?

Nongraded education is the practice of teaching children of different ages and ability levels together, without dividing them (or the curriculum) into steps labeled by grade designations. Children move from easier to more difficult material at their own pace, making *continuous progress* rather than being promoted once per year. Curriculum and teaching practices are *developmentally appropriate*. *Integrated* curriculum fosters children's physical, social, emotional, and intellectual growth (Gaustad 1992a).

Various names have been used to describe this approach, including mixed-age grouping, heterogeneous grouping, and open education. In some cases, as with Kentucky's Primary Program, alternative terminology is deliberately used to avoid negative associations with the earlier unsuccessful programs (Robinson-Armstrong 1992). Nongrading can be used with all ages but is particularly appropriate during the primary years.

A nongraded classroom differs physically from a graded one. Rows of desks do not permanently face one direction; instead, tables and chairs are frequently regrouped. "Learning Centers" are scattered around the room: tables holding math, science, and art materials; a sand table with plastic toys for pretend play; a library corner with bean-bag chairs and book-filled shelves.

Materials are geared toward hands-on learning. For example, instead of learning arithmetic solely from workbooks, children discover basic mathematical relationships by sorting, counting, and measuring real objects.

Flexible grouping is a key element of nongraded education. Students are grouped *homogeneously* by achievement for some subjects, such as math and reading. For other subjects children learn in *heterogeneous groups*. At different times students work independently, in pairs, and in large and small groups (Gaustad 1992a).

Children contribute to group projects according to their skill level. For example, in making books to display what they learned about a topic, younger children can create illustrations while older children write the text (Katz and others 1990).

Those unfamiliar with the term *nongraded* often assume it refers to the practice of not giving letter grades. Many nongraded programs do use alternative types of evaluation, such as collections of student work and descriptive reports. However, this is only a small element of the approach.

How Does Research Support Nongraded Primary Education?

Graded education assumes that students who are the same age are at basically the same level of cognitive development, can be taught in the same way, and will progress at the same rate. Intellectual development is assumed to be the goal, and the division of curriculum into discrete skills and subjects to be the most effective organization. Research has discredited all these assumptions.

Young children actually vary in their rates of intellectual development just as they do in physical development. They often progress at different rates in different areas of achievement and may alternately spurt ahead and hit plateaus rather than moving at a steady pace. Goodlad and Anderson (1987) state, "Children entering the first grade differ in mental age by approximately four full years." Even greater variation may be found in subsequent grades.

Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget established that young children are cognitively not ready to think abstractly. They learn best through active, hands-on activities with concrete materials. Research on learning has shown that, whatever the learner's age, information taught in a *meaningful context* is more easily learned than unconnected facts (Gaustad 1992a), and that individuals with different learning styles rely to different degrees on auditory, visual, and kinesthetic cues.

In its influential position statement, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp1987) summarized this

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accumulated knowledge of child development and described appropriate teaching practices for primary-age children. Its list of *developmentally appropriate* practices closely matches the components of nongraded education. The *inappropriate* practices it lists are typical of traditional graded education.

After reviewing studies comparing graded and nongraded programs, Miller (1989) concluded that multiage or multigraded classes are as effective as single-grade classes in terms of academic achievement, and superior in terms of student attitudes toward school and self. Katz and others found that participating in mixed-age groups has social and cognitive benefits for both older and younger children. Cooperative, prosocial behaviors increased and discipline problems were reduced.

What Are Its Disadvantages?

Experts agree that teaching multiage classes requires more preparation time. Teacher burnout due to insufficient planning time was one reason for the failure of earlier nongraded experiments.

Abbie Robinson-Armstrong, director of the Kentucky Department of Education's Division of Early Childhood, points out that it also requires "more knowledge about child development, integrated curriculum, and instructional strategies." Most teachers will require substantial training. Districts that previously relied heavily on single sets of textbooks and manuals will need to acquire hands-on materials and a variety of supplementary books. These changes may be costly.

It may be easier to "pick up a teacher's manual and read verbatim from it" (Robinson-Armstrong) than to use a variety of instructional strategies with groups of varying sizes. It may be more efficient to correct multiple-choice tests than to evaluate collections of student work and write descriptive comments. But as Goodlad and Anderson comment, "Efficiency takes on proper meaning only in relation to the job that should be done. To recognize that something is easy does not justify our doing it."

What Facilitates the Implementation of Nongrading?

Goodlad and Anderson found that understanding and support by teachers and parents were the factors most crucial to the success of nongraded programs. Thus educating and informing teachers and parents is the first priority. Both groups are more likely to support nongrading when they are involved in planning and decision-making (Gaustad 1992b).

Miller calls practical training in multiage teaching "critically important for success." This should include opportunities to observe effective models such as through visits to schools with pilot programs.

Hord and others (1987) found that innovations often fail because policymakers drastically underestimate how long change will take and the amount of training and support teachers will require. Realistically, full implementation of innovations require several years.

Changing to nongraded education involves multiple innovations. It affects basic educational philosophy and often clashes with deeply held expectations. However, a number of its elements can be used in graded settings, and many graded schools already use them to some extent. Adding new elements one at a time is easier than attempting to change everything at once.

How Can Administrators and School Boards Promote Nongrading?

Some districts have adopted policies endorsing nongraded education and encouraged their schools to move in that direction. In other districts, interest in nongrading has originated with teachers. Educators interviewed by Gaustad (1992b) agree that board support is extremely helpful in either case. However, most feel boards should not dictate specific actions.

Boards can help by removing impediments such as requirements for grade-level textbooks and accountability evaluation based on standardized testing. Waiving these grade-oriented regulations lessens pressure on teachers and frees them to focus on mastering nongraded teaching techniques (Gaustad 1992b).

John Thompson, director of policy services for the Kentucky School Boards Association, says boards must do the following to ensure that Kentucky's new primary program succeeds: (1) make sure their teachers receive sufficient training, (2) inform their communities, (3) find funding for transition expenses not covered by the state, and (4) monitor their schools' progress and assist in evaluating and improving the implementation process (Gaustad 1992b).

If a district decides to promote nongraded education, policymakers should acknowledge the magnitude of the change and be realistic about the time and resources it will require. Nonetheless, nongraded primary education is well worth exploring.

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